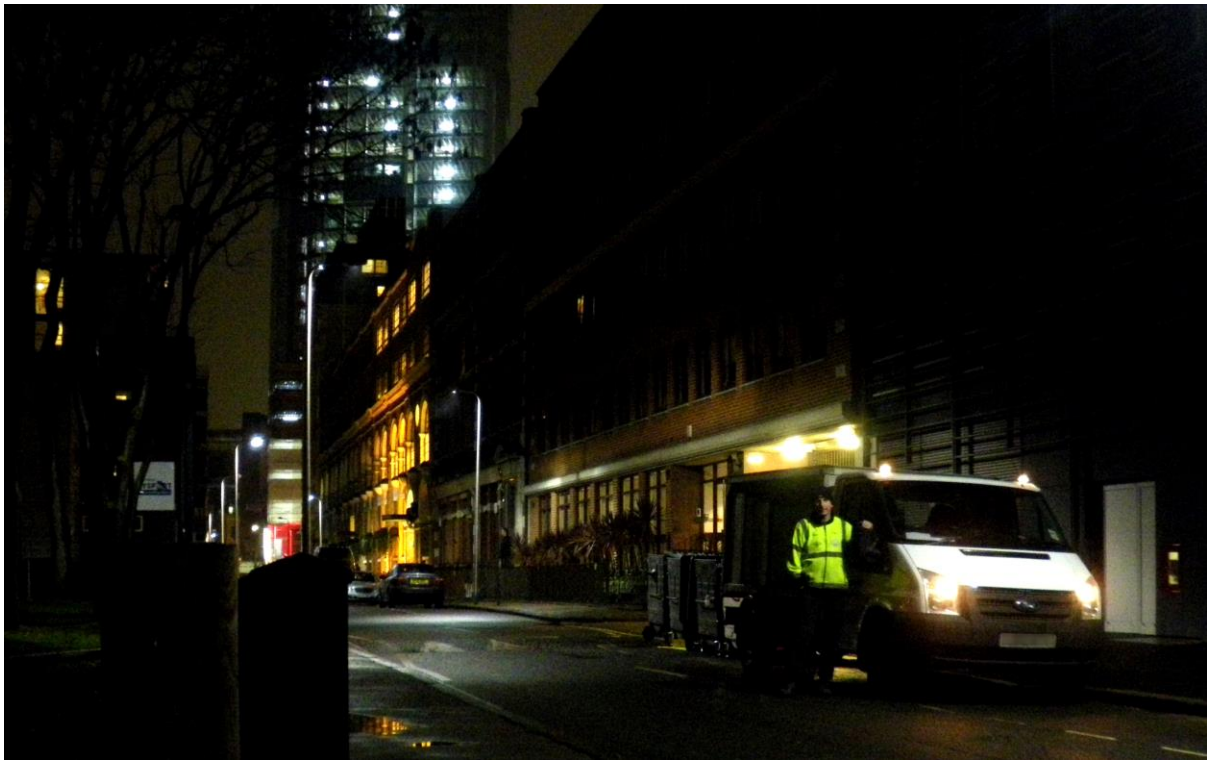


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Paul Malone: The Surface of the Street

My Union card states that my occupation is in the 'Rural and Agricultural' sector yet this job leads me daily to engage with the streets of Central London. As a milkman perhaps this is not such a contradiction. But why would an artist and graduate of the Royal College of Art want to do this? Access to studio time, an unencumbered mind-space and the resources to engage in projects are the Holy Grail of any aspiring artist. And, as one of my colleagues so astutely put it: 'You get the afternoons off, a nice van to drive, meet lots of interesting people...and they pay you as well!'

The 'Milk' had sustained my student years so I knew the business well and, over time, had been able to assess the practicalities of pursuing a binary career. It was also a dying industry. I was by that time an Inspector at the local depot in Vauxhall and one of my duties was to assess rounds for closure. In 1980 I was given one particular round to look at. It seemed intriguing; so I argued with my manager to give me some time to try to save it. This round covered the London areas of South Bank and Bankside and I have been serving it ever since.

At first it was itinerant Antipodeans to the rescue. In the early 80's the street and car parks in front of the Shell Centre were full of campervans that were up for sale by their inhabitants. The idea was to tour Europe then sell the van for the price of an air ticket back to Australia. The new owners would then do their Tour in turn...and so on. I determined that

what they needed was a mobile shop for their breakfast and duly provided this service. My manager was baffled at the extra sales and, of course, I was not telling. This community has long since been moved from the South Bank but I hope it still exists somewhere.

This area has seen some of the most extensive changes in the whole of the city, both in the built environment and the demographic and I have had the privilege of seeing these changes from my very own ring-side seat. In the period up to 1990 these boroughs were suffering substantial population loss. When the first supermarket opened on my patch soon afterwards I knew that the 'game was up' and set about re-configuring the round. We milkmen have a secret weapon against supermarkets: the monthly invoice. So, I re-canvased the round from serving homes and towards small offices. This was just in time to see the two most significant developments in South London, the International Terminal at Waterloo and building of the Tate Modern.

The former set the seal on isolating the areas to the south from the administrative and tourist areas of County Hall and the River. In addition, underneath Waterloo Station was a warren of 280 railway arches that hosted warehouses, small businesses and archival railway facilities. These were largely demolished and the local market in the Lower Marsh, which had thrived since the 1340's, effectively closed.

The opening of the Tate Modern had a radically different effect. Bankside before 2000 was a largely derelict area though with some interesting historical spots. From the earliest times it had the reputation of lawlessness and associated 'industries'. As one scrawl of graffiti put it; 'Welcome to South London – no tax man round here, my son'. To the south of Southwark Street is the historic London configuration of a Mint Street with a Sanctuary Street. It was usual to have the buildings where money was coined to be surrounded by an area where criminals could gain sanctuary from the law. This is at first sight strange but, in the light of current financial scandals, perhaps not so.

Since the arrival of the Tate it has been fashionable for businesses to site their offices in the surrounding area, especially the creative industries. This has been hugely successful and Southwark planners have largely done an excellent job of retaining the fractal nature of the built environment, especially south of Southwark Street. This continues today with a large influx of 'refugees' from high rents north of the River. There has also been an arrival of new, largely affluent residents. However, for the milkman this opportunity falls foul of that most destructive of elements – the security door.

My studio practice has largely paralleled these changes. I have met with outstanding kindness and support from the people I have come across. My first studio was provided by one of my customers – rent free and within earshot of Big Ben. Since then I have set up studio in Greenwich and now at the APT studios in Deptford. Recently my art practice has moved into the discursive and this is how the StreetSurfaces project came about.

In the mid-2000s the UK was subject to a series of water shortages. In London, this was ascribed to leaks in the old Victorian network of water mains. It was decided to replace all of these which entailed the extensive digging up of the roads. This work, coupled with the installation of fibre optic cables and the usual utilities maintenance meant that, from 2009 onwards, movement about the city became a nightmare. Rather than submit to these frustrations I decided to get creative.

Prior warning of these disruptions took the form of markings on the roads which outlined where the work was to take place. What was notable, and what I had never seen before, was the proliferation of colours and symbols that started to appear. Some were obvious, some bizarre, and the recent influx of East European workers meant that some of the words were incomprehensible except to the initiated. It seemed an interesting project to take photographs of these markings as a way of documenting the phenomenon.

I tried writing to the utilities companies concerned to see if there was an index that applied to this language. Never was there a reply. Even worse, any approach to the workers themselves resulted in strange looks as if I was clinically deranged. In this kind of situation there is only one thing to do – make up one's own rationale. By applying a logical inversion, and using the signs and symbols as the only evidence, what was it that could reasonably be assumed to be taking place?

As my collection of photos expanded so did an appreciation of the aesthetics of this surface as a creative substrate. Its blacks have many shades, tones and colour speeds and its texture is constantly being modified through erosion by traffic movements and weather events. Though the original road markings are bold, these rapidly distress into many shades of subtlety. The repeated digging-up and re-laying of parts of the road results in an intriguing patina of almost infinite complexity.

Daily, thousands of pedestrians walk this surface and yet are largely oblivious to the unique world of its visual and metaphorical content. By engaging with this lexicon the average pedestrian can enhance the most tedious of journeys. For me, this imagery reflects the imagery of the night sky but each can develop their own narrative. Like Arne Saknussemm in the Jules Verne story, let these markings lead you to your very own 'Journey to the Centre of the Earth'.

Paul's StreetSurfaces project can be found at: www.streetsurfaces.co.uk

Paul Malone 2014